

Education Abroad: New Directions for the Future

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Theodore (Regge) Life

Thank you for the warm reception and for the invitation to address your organization. This is a very special invitation for me since I am an alumnus of the Study Abroad program at Tufts University.

I would first like to first thank Natalie Mello of WPI for asking me to be here today and also to Brian Whalen, Gwendolyn Moore and all of their colleagues for their support and coordination that made today's address possible.

We just completed a workshop on re-entry and repatriation and I hope those who were able to attend, got a lot from it. This afternoon, I want to take look at Study Abroad by sharing my personal experiences as a study abroad student with the hope it will inspire the work you do - sending students overseas and as well, receiving foreign students in a post 9/11 world.

Thinking about the work you do, it begs the question: What are the dynamics of EDUCATION ABROAD today and what are the NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE of Study Abroad? What has changed over the years since I was a Study Abroad student and what remains the same? In a post 9/11 world, the work of the Study Abroad professional is more complicated with issues of safety and security. Indeed, the bar has been raised for administrators and the institution with regard to responsibility and accountability. But at the same time, we can't let these issues diminish the importance of the Off Campus experience and the contribution it makes to understanding a more globalized world.

The theme of your conference: MAPPING THE FIELD is timely and it inspired today's address because my life has been shaped by Study Abroad. So as I trace or map my life's route today, I hope you will understand the vital contribution of my first foreign sojourn as an undergraduate.

So let me take you back, back to what some might say, was a simpler America – America of the 60's and early 70's.

Tufts at that time had a number of what were called "Junior Year" abroad programs in Europe, but no programs in Africa. So in my sophomore year, two African American juniors decided to create a program for Tufts in West Africa, the kind of program that would now be called a "Heritage" or "Legacy" program. They were able to get assurance from officials at the University of Legon in Ghana and the University of Ibadan in a war torn Nigeria. I and four other students inaugurated these new Study Abroad destinations. Two of us went to Nigeria and three went to Ghana.

I chose Nigeria and Tufts did give us a pre-departure seminar and in fact, the Professor who would be our contact at the university in Ibadan, insisted upon it. He had been an international student himself in the US where he later met and married his American wife. His counsel in the United States and their openness when we arrived in Nigeria helped cushion those early days. Prior to departure, he walked us through every step of day one - from our arrival in Lagos to the campus in Ibadan. We didn't realize how fortunate we were until we heard the stories from other international students who did not get a predeparture seminar. Everything from difficulties at the airport in Lagos and even the case of a student who was sent to the notorious Kiri Kiri prison because he arrived without a visa. We were so grateful that the Professor spent an entire day of his own time, to prepare us. Once in Nigeria, his American wife helped us navigate new foods, and a myriad of cultural mores and his Mother taught us about simple ways to adapt Western habits to Nigerian lifestyle and the realities of life in a Third World country.

Despite their help, the early days were still tough. The Nigerian civil war had ended barely one year before our arrival and the scars of battle evident in Eastern Nigeria, could not be seen in Ibadan, but they could be felt in the interactions of the students. Students from “Ibo Land” or eastern Nigeria were clearly being watched by students from the Midwest and Western Nigeria, or Yoruba land, where Ibadan is located. Many of my classmates had fought in the war, so former enemies were now facing each other in a time of peace and reconstruction. As Afro-Americans as we called ourselves then, being the term of the times, we had to confront the reality that the “Motherland” was not always welcoming. There were many trials and even though I, and another person from Tufts stayed the entire year, many other African American students gave up and returned to the US. The challenges of life in a Third World country were real and brought to the forefront that despite our phenotype and historical ties with Africa, we were Americans and Americans used to a life in a society of convenience.

After arrival, it didn't take long to realize that most of my fellow African Americans wanted to remain together. We had language classes, and a dining hall assigned to us for our meals because in the beginning, the Nigerian food was regarded by most as too spicy. But the net result of this “self segregation” was alienation from the bulk of Nigerian students who viewed meals as more than just eating, it was social time. A time to bond with colleagues and classmates and we as “the Americans” were opting out. The local US Embassy was also all too willing to embrace us as “Americans” in Nigeria in a way we were never embraced in America of the 60's. This too led to confusion and led to further division. (6 mins)

I can remember all too well, finally deciding to brave the spices and eat in the regular cafeteria. At first no one would sit with me. Our collective decision to eat alone had exacerbated the clear divisions between ourselves and the Nigerians. I can never forget the day that as I looked down at my food to avoid the alienation of sharing a table with no one, that a hand reached out across my plate and a young man named Ade, with a broad smile said – Welcome to my country, welcome to Nigeria!

And later, because of my involvement with the theater, I slowly was able to wean myself away from my American colleagues and become more a part of the fabric of the university population. I also had to realize that this decision was not for everyone, and some wanted the comfort and cultural safety of sticking together, but I have no regrets that I made the choice that I did.

So when my academic year studying drama was over, I decided to stay a bit more, teaching at the international school connected with the university, performing and completing a separate post-graduate degree at Ibadan which gave me additional credits and the option to return to Tufts and receive my degree or graduate while still abroad.

I decided to stay. At that time, communications between Nigeria and the outside world were not good, so aside from visits to the home of the Nigerian professor and his American wife and sporadic US Embassy functions, I was to use a term of *these* times, “embedded” in Nigerian culture and society. There was no term “helicopter parent” at that time, but all of our parents did their best to keep in touch. In one case, due to persistent telegrams and finally a panic stricken phone call, one young lady from Hawaii hastily departed. I tried to maintain independence from home but I clearly remember an incident at Christmas time.

Many of us arranged for our parents to call us at the Professor's home. He had one of a few working phones in the entire city that could receive an international call. I remember this as a critical moment in my overseas experience because I had to tell my Mother and Father, that despite their tearful voices, I had decided to stay the entire time and “I was happy”. The part about being happy was especially important because as an Afro American, a person of African descent, in spite the challenges in a volatile country like Nigeria, I felt empowerment on African soil.

When the year abroad was over, I bid my Tufts colleague goodbye and I learned later, that upon her return, there was no debriefing, no re-entry seminar on the campus. She just came back to the US, the administration hoped that she had made summer plans and expected her to report back to Tufts in the fall. Sensing that a flight from Lagos to New York when I decided to leave would not be the best way to “come home”, I traveled by air and road to every major city in West Africa between Lagos and Tangiers and then the same way from Madrid to London. The return took more than 3 months but during that time, the survival lessons of life in the Third World, honed in Nigeria, were put to good use.

I navigated throughout West Africa and shed tears when the plane lifted from the tarmac in Morocco for Spain. The stories from my time in Europe are too numerous to share this afternoon, but in Europe I met many expatriates from all over the world and entertained the idea of joining their ranks, but something kept pushing me on to my next destination until with roughly 77 cents in my pocket and my plane ticket, I called home and arranged to be picked up at JFK.

Even with this 3 months of personal re-entry preparation from a Third World experience to what some call a First World experience in Europe, I was still unprepared for the culture shock of life back in the US. The night I returned, friends threw a party but before long I had retreated into a corner just to “watch” my fellow Americans. This retreat became a way of life as I spent hours and sometimes days inside my room at my parent’s home. I had expected it to be easier, but it was an ordeal and after a while, I stopped trying. Finally an old friend coaxed me out and with each passing day, I opened up a little more, until one day, I began to reconnect and look for work. The phone finally rang with an offer to go on the road with a national touring company of a Broadway show.

I could not have been happier, but realize now that I took a job just to be on the road again. I can honestly say it was after those 12 months of touring and seeing a majority of America for the first time, that I did finally come home. I finally acknowledged and understood my Americanness and I was finally able to put the overseas experiences into a productive context.

Inspired by this initial experience, I have continued to travel and explore. Despite many ups and downs, I am forever grateful, forever thankful for the maiden voyage provided by Tufts and Study Abroad which has given me the backbone for my life and my work.

My early film work took me back to West Africa and after presenting those films at festivals, I was granted invitations all over the world and the chance to produce later films in the Caribbean and South America. But these were all short term stays, but in 1990, the opportunity presented itself for another sojourn – this time in Asia. So as a NEA Creative Artist fellow, I journeyed to Japan and was the first non-Japanese to watch the making of Tora San, which holds the Guinness record as the longest running film series. What began as a six month fellowship, lasted almost four years.

But this was a long time ago and in a different world. Facing the challenges I spoke of earlier, how can we share the potential benefits of an overseas experience that will tap into the consciousness of today’s student population? In a world filled with messages of terrorism, what can be done to get students to think about spending time away from the US? With so many short term programs, how can Study Abroad be structured to give students more time and quality time abroad?

Thinking back on my own experience, after I said “Yes” to embark on Study Abroad, facing an uncertain climate in a country that just witnessed a civil war, the question boiled down to: What kind of experience did I want to have? What did I expect to find in Nigeria? With all that is happening in the world today, the question

for me is still the same: What experience do your students want to have with Study Abroad? And what are their expectations?

With the new challenges of a globalized community, how do you identify today's potential Study Abroad student?

For me it was curiosity and I think curiosity is important because without curiosity nothing else will really compel students to consider an overseas experience. When I decided to spend a year abroad it was driven more by curiosity than by heritage or legacy. Prior to the overseas trip from NY to London, the only plane ride I had taken was a very bumpy flight from LaGuardia to Boston and had I used that as an example of air travel, I would have been looking for a boat to make the Atlantic crossing. But none of this entered into my mind as I boarded the plane at JFK. I was excited to finally see the world outside of the US, to see Europe and then ultimately Africa. And despite the challenges I talked about earlier, warm memories and powerful lessons remain with me to this day. Learning to rise at 6:30 Am to line up for one bucket of water because water was on for only 30 minutes each day, and learning not only to bathe, but to save a bit of the unused water to brush my teeth. You learn respect for the conveniences we have as Americans when the power just goes off and when you inquire when it will come back, the response is: "it's finished". There were also the memorable trips to the Eastern part of Nigeria where I viewed the aftermath of the war first hand and was still welcomed into the home of a classmate who had lost family during the war. There are too many memories, too many things that have guided my life and my career right up to this day but I know that, Study Abroad was my baptism on the road to become as I consider myself now, a Global Citizen.

Study Abroad started me on the path and helped me to develop the skills necessary to be an intercultural communicator through my work in film. It gave me the necessary tools to examine and approach the crises of today's world with objectivity and analysis.

I was told and I have often heard it said that "Study Abroad will change your life" In my case it did. It opened me up and since that experience I have not turned back. As I prepared to embark on my last long term sojourn in Japan, the same negativisms greeted me from friends and family that greeted me as I packed for Nigeria. Eighteen years before it was fear of continued violence at the end of a civil war and now it was fear of certain bodily injury in a country where the residents were considered as racists. But the same impulse drove me – Curiosity and interest. I wanted to know for myself what it would be like in this foreign land, so remembering all the naysayer's as I prepared to leave for Nigeria, there was little chance I would be persuaded to abandon plans to travel to Japan. And just as the ups and downs in Nigerian society helped to buttress my travels throughout all of West Africa and Europe, the memories and the life lessons of that time guided my path in Japan as I confronted the struggles and contradictions of Japanese society in the early days. I knew based on my past experiences – it would and did get better. After my initial period of adjustment and I moved into living and working in Japan, producing a trilogy of films, I grew more comfortable with my role as a "professional foreigner" a phrase I learned from long time resident, Donald Ritchie and a way of being in the world I know so well now. Through the films on Japan, I wanted to produce a lasting record of the struggles of Americans and Japanese to understand each other on a heart to heart level, to help guide this on going process for the future. Because of the early lessons learned via Study Abroad, the bulk of my film work is now directed towards an international audience – towards the global arena.

So in conclusion, we need Study Abroad. We need to encourage students to take part in Study Abroad and when they return, we need to employ all our skills and all our efforts, to help them incorporate the experiences of that precious time away, into their futures.

I am going to close my prepared remarks now and end the presentation with a brief excerpt from the last film of my trilogy on Japan. The film is titled, AFTER AMERICA...AFTER JAPAN. I am going to show a portion

from the film that features Americans who have returned and who are coming to terms with what the experience now means in their life.

I hope you enjoy the clip. Thank you for the invitation and for the pleasure and the great fortune to address you today. My thanks to all the interculturalists and Study Abroad professionals who have guided and supported my work. It delights me to see many of them here today. Have a great conference.

THE NEW STUDY ABROAD MODEL

1. There is still a responsibility in a globalized world to get American students to experience life outside of the US. The numbers are still out of balance. It is estimated that roughly 500K foreign students come the US for university compared to 110K American students going abroad. Now these numbers may have risen in recent years, but the imbalance remains.

2. There is now a predominance of Short Term programs. Some as short as only a few weeks that has replaced the old model of a semester abroad.

Why is this? It appears that both students and their parents are concerned with how long they are willing to be away from home and from the United States due to concerns about security and terrorism. As Study Abroad professionals you want students to stay out longer, but the Short Term trend is something you all face. Clinical Psychologist, Anne Copeland remarked that her daughter who is now a Junior at a small liberal arts college, talked about the high percentage of Study Abroad students who brag about their overseas experience, but in reality the time they spend away is 2 or 3 weeks, a month at most. So this new model creates a kind of “culture shock chic” where kids play up their time abroad no matter how short it is.

3. The rise of “Heritage Seekers” or “Legacy Students” who are going back to the birth place of their ancestors or simply the birth place of parents. For example, Southeast Asian students are returning to be a part of VIA, volunteers in Asia, African American students going back to Africa and Latino students returning to Mexico and Central America. They will have identity shifts during the sojourn, vis a vis the Mexican American student who suddenly becomes the “gringo” in Mexico along with identity issues when they return.
4. As we all know, Institutions want to increase the numbers of students participating in Study Abroad programs. Study Abroad is part of the financial model at today’s universities. So pursuant to that, you have the Millennium Student who is concerned with the ROI, or return on investment for this time spent abroad. They want guarantees that this time away from campus will really increase their marketability upon their return and graduation.
5. Regulations that create artificial government barriers, ie: visas and the inability of visiting students to easily go home and return to their US institution as they wish. Inspired by fears of terrorism and the current immigration debate, these obstacles present ever changing challenges. Students and scholars alike have often been caught up in the various security nets meant to catch terrorists along with the policy and regulatory changes meant to improve security. The result? In some cases, students and scholars are being denied entry. Ironically despite the additional work created for the coordinator or advisor at the university, all too often, the foreign students that are able to get in, derive more from the time in the US than US students get spending time abroad. Some American students are still very much in a “bubble” while outside of the United States.

And last but clearly not least, Security. Now Security was an issue even when I was a Study Abroad student, but since 9/11, security, terrorism and the by products of this new reality are having major impact on the work you do.

TERRORISM

Is something we all deal with in a big way since 9/11. Terrorism has impacted where students can go and where they will go. Parents are uneasy and generally want their children to be stateside. Security has become a big factor in the Study Abroad toolbox.

For example, Study Abroad in the Middle East is risky and there are places where American students may feel unwelcome or the student is afraid to go.

“The overbearing concern is to have a crisis plan in place” Bruce LaBrack shared with me. “it is now about risk management, risk assessment and communication, being able to reach the student”. And he added “The Parent!”

So with the importance of communication - what is the effect of email, the cell phone and text messaging? Students and parents alike have concerns about how fast, and how dependable communication will be. Students want to be in touch with their friends and colleagues back at school in addition to contact with family. So with students connecting more frequently, is this healthy for the effectiveness of the overseas sojourn? Connection with home can be a positive factor but not so if it gets in the way of immersion and the chance to have a true intercultural experience.

Noted Interculturalist Peggy Pusch coined a phrase for me, the “helicopter Parent” – hovering via the net or some form of communication with their son or daughter on a daily basis. So we have to ask ourselves, how does this help or sabotage the overseas experience?

Ultimately there is a lot more hand holding going on now.

Peggy also shared an email with me from a colleague at a Midwestern university who had read a posting about potential hate crimes by “skinheads” in Eastern Europe against people who were non-white, Jewish or homosexual. Whereas first it was the employees of American businesses and their families that were targets, foreign university students soon became targets as well.

This Study Abroad professional asked how others were addressing this kind of situation be it anywhere in the world and if these kinds of reports were being shared with students.

He asked if this information was being shared in email messages, and was the information coupled with counseling and coordination with cultural centers on the campus. Tough but needed questions. We have all heard about these racially charged issues in Europe – but all too often we don’t think that American students abroad could also be targeted. Anne Copeland shared with me that when she was an Academic Advisor for Study Abroad to England, she urged students not to stand out as Americans - and this is before 9/11.

And what if there is an incident?

Via today’s communications, the student may or may not be able to get in contact. You as the Study Abroad professional have to get info immediately to the parent, and be in touch with program coordinators in-country. Parents will be in a panic – even when their child is fine! So now, there are new risk factors to be considered. You must be concerned with EVAC programs, Crisis Management and a big factor – Insurance. Before these were nice things to have if you needed them, but now they are mandatory.

I have been told that numbers in Study Abroad dropped after the incident on 9/11 but my hope is that after 5 years the numbers are beginning to return but a lot has changed in the last 5 years and even more from the days when I was a Study Abroad student. So as a way of thanking the Study Abroad office at Tufts and honoring all of you in the room for what you do, let me share my personal story as evidence of the importance and the power of Study Abroad.

THERE ARE PROGRAMS THAT ARE WORKING

Despite the rumors of materialism and apathy in today’s students, because of the internet and the ease of worldwide communication, there is interest and desire to reach across borders. In addition to traditional motivations, volunteering and service learning have become a window for students to participate in Study

Abroad and gain a powerful experience upon re-entry. A window is opened as well for the Advisor to see what Study Abroad meant for the student, and this same window provides an opportunity to assist them in sorting things out.

In speaking with Peggy Pusch, she is enthusiastic about this combination of service and academic study that blends theory and practice and gives students a chance to be a part of the culture, a fully intercultural experience.

Anne Copeland is also a proponent of internships. The Boston University students she advised took 3 courses along with an internship. They lived in apartments, had to shop locally and took public transportation. For most, it was a good experience. The course content was good, but the cultural experience was the best part. She shared proudly, “Nothing beats the thrill of witnessing cultural difference”.

I am not an advocate for Immersion or what some call an “Island Program”, because I see benefits in both and both are necessary and effective. Both programs provide avenues for American students to see a world outside of their own and this is a good thing.

BUT ONE DAY WE ALL RETURN

As I stated in my own case, orientation before departure was just as important as at re-entry, so how can you plan both effectively?

Anne Copeland shared that she is not sure how much cross cultural preparation students get before departure, but commented that prepared ground makes for a more productive experience.

Assignments might be shorter now, and three weeks abroad doesn't usually bring up issues about re-entry, but it doesn't completely cushion re-entry trauma either, so attention to re-entry regardless of the time the student is away is crucial.

“If the experience is shorter, you may need more orientation. Preparation to SEE things while away. More guidance, shared Bruce LaBrack. He went on to say, “this technique is most important at re-entry to be able to explain the experience and put it together, so they, the student, can expand on it for the future.

So what are the issues generated by the degree of immersion the student experienced in the host country and culture and what was the intensity of the immersion? The discomfort of re-entry often times depends on the degree of immersion and one to one contact during the sojourn.

And what about issues of denial? Students who are clearly dealing with culture shock and re-entry but they won't verbalize their feelings. This is very common and something I will explore later today in my workshop.

Also the challenge of dealing with students who didn't adjust to being in a foreign culture. Joyce Blake of Families in Global Transition shared stories about students who could not understand even basic tasks while abroad and who cramped up but were too embarrassed to ask for help.

So the biggest challenge to everyone in this room is planning a Re-entry program and finding enough time to do it holistically. All too often, promises made to students at departure and re-entry can not be fully implemented due a variety to factors including time. So what can help? Here are two suggestions from professionals in the field.

1. Host family programs
2. Reunions

Host family programs should be implemented in-country, as I experienced in Nigeria and upon return. “Family” need not be limited to placing a returning student with another student and their immediate family, but this umbrella can be broadened to include the “family of sojourners” from all over the globe.

Joyce Blake urges universities to look at the TCK model of hosting. They use a mentoring program, a big brother or sister who can facilitate. They meet monthly or sometimes weekly with the student and help they sort out a myriad of issues on a peer basis. Many students coming back can end up on the “fringe” of campus life, so this buddy system helps to prevent that.

Third Culture Kids also have great Reunion programs that create environments for shared stories and a chance to “Be Heard” so that the sojourners understand each others transitions. In addition, speakers are brought in to talk about life skills, so students get a leg up understanding and incorporating their feelings from the overseas experience, but they also gain tools for navigating a changed environment now that they are back home.

Students then return back to their universities feeling complete. Joyce Blake predicts that the normal weekend gathering could be extended to a full week in the coming years.

Bruce LaBrack also referenced the TCK paradigm. “When families take kids overseas, they make their children TCK kids. Global Nomads that return to a place that is not necessarily home. Due to specialization in the corporate world, today’s corporations are now sending people out and when they return, they go out again, so instead of moving from the US to a destination abroad, they are sometimes moving from country to country. So when the children return, there are multiple adjustments.

Much can be learned and borrowed from the programs that have been developed for this growing community of TCK kids or Global Nomads for your Study Abroad students.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?

When I put this question to Peggy Pusch, she said she wanted to see more programs and greater emphasis on total immersion. Less worry about ROI and more emphasis made about the quality of the Abroad experience. “Getting involved in the culture is hard. There are language barriers sometimes, so it is tough to just jump in” shared Anne Copeland. And she closed by saying, “Universities need to create opportunities that are both educational and cultural”.

But above all, Peggy emphasized, programs need to be facilitated. Anne agrees with facilitation. Have a guide! She told me.

Bruce LaBrack expressed the need for more panels on “Identity Transformation”. He shared, “There are a multitude of new issues. The student is asking Where do I fit? Where does my family fit?” We need to consider if enough is being done with this growing population of students.

Bruce went on to say, “Study Abroad is essential to globalization. There are programs in Europe that allow students there to attend any university. We want opportunities like this for American students, particularly for students with a rigid curriculum where they are generally unable to go abroad”. For those that do participate in Study Abroad, “When they return, they have worked in multi-cultural, multi-lingual environments”. This is resource building. Students need to look at what skills they need and use these opportunities to pre-adapt to a global marketplace. It is more imperative now to seek out non-traditional places for Study Abroad programs. The Europeans and Australians are doing it, what about American universities?” he emphasized.

So in cases where there are students who have spent a longer time abroad and there are these Study Abroad short tremors, there can be big differences of opinion and sometimes tension. Anne Copeland shared that when she advised a Study Abroad program, most students wanted to go to Paris. It is hard to get a real intercultural experience when you are effectively a tourist on a 3 week junket.

So at your institution, who is that student today? Is it the student first in line, the one looking for insight or the person who already seems to be on the fringe? When they ask the questions about a potential overseas experience, someone needs to be there to facilitate and what happens after that facilitation can be breathtaking. Recalling my time in Ibadan, my early interactions with the international school were times of giving service. It was via this connection that a modest teaching job was offered to me at the end of the school year, but it came after proving that I was interested and I was willing to share my skills.

Too many students are returning like my Tufts colleague, and not finding a way to make the time overseas a part of them and see it as a step in personal development. This is the biggest challenge facing all of us in this room.

So I wish to thank Peggy Pusch, Bruce LaBrack, Joyce Blake and Anne Copeland for sharing their expertise on Study Abroad

Looking back now I liken it to the phenomenon of “hikikomori” prevalent now in Japan with the younger generation who have retreated from Japanese society.